



**We remember
Sister Mary Kateri Vojir, RSM
1922 - 2010**

~ a Sister of Mercy for 68 years!

By Sister Kathleen (Kay) O'Brien

You know how people are always saying that kids don't remember much of what they're taught in school? Well I'm here to tell you that I **do** remember much of what I learned in eighth grade from Sr. M. Kateri. I learned about the German Blitzkrieg and the liberation of Auschwitz in World War II from her. I learned about the Suez Canal crisis. I learned about Pope Leo the XIII's Encyclical *Rerum Novarum*. I don't remember how she taught us all this, but it stuck. I do remember how she taught the function of the human lung in science class. She had Ralph Cerian and me build a lung out of an oatmeal box, Saran Wrap and masking tape.

Sr. Kateri was a no-nonsense, practical intellectual and an insightful, enthusiastic teacher. When she played the piano during music class, that piano knew it had been played and she'd look over her shoulder with starch rattling and her veil board back, so she could see as well as hear us singing.

The books she read to us after noon recess **every day** became some of my favorite literature—*Outlaws of Ravenhurst*, *The Deliverance of Sister Cecilia*, and a book called *Mickey O'Brien*. These were all books about people who struggled to live their Catholic faith. And besides being an excellent teacher, Sr. Kateri was also an example to us of someone who lived her Catholic faith.

Betty Vojir was born on July 30, 1922 to Joseph A. and Jennie Petru Vojir who lived on South 12th Street in Omaha. As an only child, Betty found herself surrounded by a host of extended family members—many cousins are with us today. Theirs was a close-knit family living in the Czech section of Omaha in St.

Wenceslaus Parish. Though she was a second generation American, Betty spoke only Czech at home until she went to school.

Her parents wanted to make sure that she could communicate with her Czech-speaking grandparents. Her mother, Jennie Petru, had attended St. Wenceslaus School, graduating in 1910. This parish, a center of Czech culture in the United States, had acquired a name for itself as “Mother Church of Nebraska Czech Catholics.” While Betty's world was small in a physical sense and she knew everyone and felt safe everywhere, she expanded her world through her love for reading and her passion for learning.

Apparently she had a passion for everything she did as a child. Her father called her “Cyclone,” because she was usually in a hurry. As an only child, she had close and positive relationships with both of her parents. When asked, on a Villa questionnaire, about her father she said, “Can't say enough. Always there for me. Deeply religious. Directed 25-member choir for many years.”

About her mother she said, “Serious—yet a great sense of humor and fun. Deeply religious, very active in her parish. Church soloist in choir.” Then she added, She was “Like a sister. We did a lot together, took trips together.”

One of her fondest memories was of her Grandfather Petru handing out candy from a sack he carried around.

And from her earliest days in grade school, Betty wanted to be a sister. “The first Mercies I met,” she said in her “Musings,” “were in Omaha where they were not only my first, but my only, teachers through

St. Wenceslaus Grade School, St. Mary High School, and the College of St. Mary.”

Betty entered the Sisters of Mercy on September 8, 1941. Sr. M. Kateri took her first vows in 1944 and her final vows in 1947. She once told the story of making her first vows on a Sunday in 1944, then walking into a fifth grade classroom at Holy Cross School on Monday morning to teach with no preparation since she had been trained to teach music, not the totality of the fifth grade curriculum.

In her career she taught mostly high school and mostly in Omaha except for a stint at St. Albert’s in Council Bluffs from 1964 until 1967. She served as principal of Mercy High School during a turbulent time in the school’s history and she taught and served as registrar at College of Saint Mary.

Whatever she did she brought to bear every piece of knowledge and every talent she possessed and did the best she could. Catherine McAuley spoke of the perfection of our ordinary actions. Sister Kateri lived this dictum.

It will be no surprise to any of you when I say that Sr. M. Kateri had a deep and profound spiritual life. She fed it with her reading from spiritual works as varied as Tanquerri, Therese of Lisseux and Thomas Merton. One of her favorite elements of retirement was the time she had to read and to pray. She would read her favorite spiritual mentors over and over to let the lessons sink in and be integrated with her own life and prayer experience.

It didn’t take many minutes with her for her sensible, practical and confident presence to reveal the depth of her connection to God—seldom overt, but always obvious because it’s who she was—who she still is.

She confessed to me one day a couple of years ago when we were visiting that she never considered herself a “popular” teacher. I stumbled around trying to tell her what a good teacher she had been, popularity aside. But the class ahead of me at St. John’s did a much better job of telling her what she needed to hear.

When asked in a questionnaire to tell a story about some thing she was proud of she said, “My first eighth grade class had a reunion at which I was the honored guest, received an orchid corsage, and a commemorative plaque—52 years after I taught them!” She kept the plaque in a visible place in her room where she could look at it often and she showed it to me the next time we visited. It reads: “Sr. Kateri, The best 8th Grade Teacher in the Whole World by Her Grateful Saint Johns 8th Grade Class of 1957” I wanted to say “Told you so!”

She loved teaching at St. John’s with the collegiate atmosphere and, obviously, St. John’s children loved her back. We all loved her.

She appreciated time with family, the care and support she received here at the Villa from the staff and from her sisters, especially Sr. Catherine Marie, as she struggled to end her life with the dignity with which she had always lived it.

Rest in peace, Sr. Kateri, where you are now spending eternity learning more about and feeling the breadth and the length and height and depth of the love of a God who is beyond all understanding.

Death is not extinguishing
the Light;
it is putting out the lamp
because Dawn has come.
- Tagor

Mary Kateri Vojir, RSM
Died in Christ - 3/9/10